DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 065 785 AC 012 772

AUTHOR	Sampson, M. W.
TITLE	The Newsletter--An Adult Educator's Tool.
PUB DATE	71
NOTE	22p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Education; Adult Educators; *Audiences; *Costs; Extension Education; Information Dissemination; *Newsletters; *Objectives; Printing

ABSTRACT

The newsletter as an adult educator's tool should inform, promote, guide, and coordinate. Based on Extension Service newsletters, this report presents a number of guidelines for newsletter editors. Among them are checking the costs of producing a newsletter, considering the subject, audience, and objective of the newsletter, and what the audience can gain. In addition, layout, writing style, paper selection, reproduction process (duplicator, mimeograph, offset printing, photo offset, letterpress), mailing regulations, and mailing lists are discussed. A number of studies on the effectiveness of direct mail are reviewed. The advantages and disadvantages of newsletters are noted. In general, however, the newsletter can be a useful and effective method for adult educators to reach adults, and, because of its flexibility, the newsletter can respond to specific needs of a specific audience. (JS)

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THE NEWSLETTER--AN ADULT EDUCATOR'S TOOL

by

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A paper submitted in partial

fulfillment of the requirements

for the course

AG EX 401

Spring Semester

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

1971

AC 012 772

THE NEWSLETTER--AN ADULT EDUCATOR'S TOOL

A newsletter can be an effective tool in an adult education program. Although the newsletter may be somewhat limited by the mechanics surrounding the production of printed words on paper, the newsletter has proven itself to be an effective means of communicating with a specific audience and increasing the knowledge, or desire for knowledge, of that audience. Many questions concerning the effect newsletters have in moving individuals to action or in adopting new practices are, unfortunately, inadequately answered.

The newsletter is just what the name implies--a letter about news. Enlarging upon this, the newsletter, sometimes called a circular or circular letter, is a form of direct mail, sent on a regular, or irregular, schedule to a selected group of people. It should contain pithy, short and interesting pieces of information, written in a personalized "you and I" style, and designed to create interest and awareness. The newsletter should be a clearing house of information not readily available somewhere else. It should build anticipation. The reader should come to expect new and fresh information from the newsletter, information he has not seen before.[1]

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[1] Jim Johnson, A Self-Instruction Manual for Newsletter Writing and Production, (University of Idaho), p. 5.

Generally, the newsletter is sent by mail. The newsletter carries a definite message and is the writer's way of personally communicating with many people.[2]

Newsletters come in any variety of shapes and styles. Some use illustrations, and some even may use photographs if the correct mechanical equipment is available. The two most popular sizes of newsletters, at least in regard to Cooperative Extension Service work, are sheets of paper 8½" by 11" or 8½" by 14", usually folded twice and self-mailing. The size of paper the newsletter is printed on in no way alters the definition of the newsletter, since the newsletter is simply a vehicle for conveying information.

However, the adult educator continually needs to bear in mind that direct mail is a personal contact.[3] "Contents vary with the writers and the subjects. In general, they tell of recent developments in the subject matter field, report research and other findings of interest to readers, carry success stories of individuals, promote products or events that are upcoming, and relay useful ideas."[4]

To understand the proper use of the newsletter, one must realize that there is a vast difference between the idealized definition of "what a newsletter ought to be" and "what a newsletter actually is." Although any number of authors and publications have tips and

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[2]Barton Morgan, Glenn E. Holmes and Clarence E. Bundy, Methods in Adult Education, (Danville, Ill., 1960), p. 146.

[3]American Association of Agricultural College Editors, communications handbook, (Danville, Ill., 1970), p. 51.

[4]Ibid., p. 57.

guidelines for producing attractive newsletters, too often the adult educator, or whoever is using the newsletter as a communications vehicle, finds the newsletter in reality turns out to be somewhat less than an idealized vision.

Before undertaking the production of any newsletter, an adult educator should do some serious pencil-pushing and fact-weighing. Not only should he check into the costs of producing a newsletter, he should give consideration to the subject of the newsletter, the audience to whom the newsletter is to be directed (who, how many, age, education level, etc.), the objective of the newsletter and what the audience can gain from the newsletter.[5]

> There are certain mechanics one should observe in preparing a newsletter. The printing should be uniform, not with light type in places followed by heavy type in other places. Care should be exercised to see that the duplicating process is well done. If the letters are mimeographed or duplicated by some offset process, the proper use of ink or fluid is very important. Smearing and smudging should be avoided.
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> The general placement of the letter on the sheet of paper is likewise important. Is the letter well centered, both horizontally and vertically? Are margins even?
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> One mistake in spelling ruins the message. This is an unpardonable error. Incorrect grammar is equally as serious. Even though there may be variation among authorities as to

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[5] Reaching Farmers Direct, (Washington, D.C.).

punctuation, all agree upon basic principles. Proper punctuation assures understanding by the reader, which is most important.

Appropriate illustrations should be used. These add to the attractiveness of the letter and are "attention catchers."[6]

Just to get started on producing a newsletter, an adult educator, or any other person using a newsletter as a means of reaching an audience, must be a bit of a writer, a bit of an English teacher and be blessed with a gift for spelling--or have a dictionary close at hand. But other factors enter into newsletters too.

Contents of newsletters vary with the writers and the subjects. Newsletters follow a free, less formal type of writing. Many have the combination of the chatty style of a personal letter plus the brevity and "get-to-the-point" of a news story.[7]

The writer usually assumes that the reader knows something about the subject and can build on that knowledge from one issue to another. New or uncommon terms should be defined quickly or used so that their meanings are clear.

As in most communication methods, capture the attention of your reader quickly. One easy way to do this is to place the most important, interesting or timely items first in the letter. If an article is overly long, consider using it as an enclosure with the newsletter.

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[6] Morgan, pp. 146-7.

[7] communications handbook, p. 57.

> Start with a brief, to-the-point paragraph. Vary your opening sentences. Keep your sentences and paragraphs short for easy reading and more attractive appearance. Get to the point. Avoid long introductions. Use familiar words. Speak the language of your reader.[8]

Becoming proficient in producing attractive and informative newsletters an audience will look forward to receiving is far from simple. Putting out a good newsletter takes work, a good deal of thought and a lot of attention to details. There are quite a few books available that provide guidance for handling newsletters, but perhaps one of the most helpful, at least from an Extension educator's standpoint, is the communications handbook compiled by the American Association of Agricultural College Editors. The book contains recommendations from agricultural editors, who in effect are adult educators, about some of the proper ways "to get your feet on the ground" in the newsletter world.

The layout, or arrangement, of the newsletter is important, not only in attractively "packaging" the newsletter and its contents, but also in attracting the reader's attention and holding it. A newsletter is similar to a newspaper. Hard-to-read newspapers, with few pictures, little white space and a crowded appearance will not attract and hold a reader's attention. So a newsletter must follow the same rules a newspaper does. Generally, the layout of a newsletter is an aid to the reader, and a few tips that help readers include:

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[8] Ibid.

1) Use a column that's the right width for easy reading. If you are using a piece of 8½ by 11 paper in a vertical format for example, one of the most effective techniques is to use a single column with space at the left for headlines. If a column extends clear across the page, the line is too long to be read easily. Keeping paragraphs short also is a help to the reader. Six lines is a good length to go by.

2) Break up the page so that it isn't a solid mass of gray typing. Using short paragraphs is a help here. Wide margins, leaving a line between paragraphs and using headlines and sub-heads helps put white space into a newsletter.

3) Write headlines that help tell the story. A good headline gives the reader a good idea of the main point of the item. A head is not just a label. Heads in caps and lower case letters are easier to read than heads in all capital letters.

4) Use display devices to make main points stand out. There are a number of devices that can be used to play up important items. Use graphs or charts, boxes around main points, photos or line drawings, underline key words or points, indented paragraphs and indented points set off with dots or numbers. Just remember not to get too carried away with using display devices, or the effect will be lost.

5) Choose a color combination that's easy to read. Bright colors attract attention, but they make reading too difficult. Any of the subdued colors are fine. Using a special color, say

> blue paper, will help build identity for the newsletter. It's also important to pick a good combination of colors for paper and ink and stick with it.[9]

Although the newsletter may be attractive and well written in the mind, what happens between the "ideal" product and the "finished" product unfortunately may be two different things. Any number of newsletters in Washington, for example, have fallen victim to mechanical problems in the duplicating process. Many newsletters in this state are mimeographed, that is, they are printed from a stencil which has been typed on a typewriter. Unless the ink is adjusted correctly, the newsletter may be smudged or hard to read, both of which serve to give readers a poor impression of what you as an adult educator have to offer.

Selection of paper also is important. If only one side of the paper is being used, this may not be as important as if both sides of the paper are being used. If too light a paper is used, say a 16 pound mimeograph paper, there is a good chance printing on one side will show through to the other side. The best solution in this case is to use a 20 or 24 pound paper, each of which is heavy enough to prevent printing on one side from showing through to the other.

In addition to using the correct weight and color of paper, the stencil, if the newsletter is to be mimeographed, is important because a well prepared stencil will do a better job of producing quality reproductions. In A Self-Instruction Manual for Newsletter Writing and Production, Jim Johnson, agricultural editor at the University of Idaho

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[9] Reaching Farmers Direct.

in Moscow, lists several suggestions for producing high quality and legible mimeographed newsletters.

Be sure you're using the right stencil for the job. Some stencils have softer coating than others. The type face style of your typewriter may work better on one than another. Your supplier can help you here.

Stencils must be prepared correctly. A poorly prepared stencil will produce poor quality reproductions. Use an electric typewriter if possible. Each key strikes with the same force. If a manual typewriter must be used, impress upon your typist the importance of developing a solid, even typing style.

Letters with hollow portions, such as the "o," "p," and "b" are the worst offenders of an improperly adjusted machine. They strike too hard in relation to the other keys and cut through the stencil completely. The result is a hole in the stencil that produces a solid blob of ink on the paper instead of an outlined letter.

Do not use a script or modified script typewriter style. It's hard to read.

Use illustrations to support your information, not to "doll up" your newsletter. Too many illustrations take away from the serious nature of your newsletter. Too many illustrations unrelated to the information may give the newsletter a comic book look. Your information is the important thing--not the illustrations.

Be sure the typist proofreads the stencil carefully before removing it from the typewriter. Be sure she understands how to correct stencils properly.

Keep your duplicating machine in good operating condition. Have it cleaned and adjusted periodically. Be sure the machine operator understands all adjustments that can be made on the machine. Arrange for a training session if she doesn't.[10]

Although mimeographing is the most common method of printing newsletters, there are several other methods, which vary not only in price but in quality. The least expensive method of producing newsletters is to use a spirit duplicator or "ditto" stencil and machine. This method is at the bottom of the list as far as quality is concerned. Line drawings can be used. The typewritten "master" can be used for about 100 copies.

The mimeograph is the most common method used. If the equipment is modern and in good condition, this probably is the most economical process in terms of money spent. The process is time consuming in that a stencil must be typed and run off on a duplicator. One stencil usually is good for 3,000 to 5,000 copies and illustrations can be used, although they may not be of good quality.[11]

The next most expensive method is offset printing, or multilithing. The reproduction is more attractive than mimeographing, and gives satisfactory reproductions of illustrations. Offset printing, as well as

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[10] Johnson, pp. 70-72.

[11] Emilie T. Hall, Writing and Producing Newsletters, (Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y.,October 1964), p. 20.

most mimeographing operations, requires some kind of water source close to the equipment, table space for folding and addressing and proper paper storage. If the storage is too dry, the paper will pick up static electricity; if too damp, it will buckle; if wet, it will bulge; and too much heat will cause it to curl.[12] These conditions generally become a problem only when quantities of paper are to be stored for a length of time. Paper usually is less expensive when bought in quantity than when bought in quantities of a ream or two at a time. Any number of papers are available for use with offset equipment, as are any number of inks. An almost unlimited quantity can be reproduced by this method.

The fourth method of increasing expense and quality is photo offset, which usually is done in a commercial printing shop. The equipment necessary for photo offset is expensive and often sophisticated, requiring skilled personnel. The process is fairly quick and produces a high quality, attractive reproduction. In addition, photographs can be used in this process. Again, an almost unlimited quantity of reproductions can be made using this method.

The fifth and most expensive method of producing newsletter is letterpress printing. Letterpress will give high quality reproduction, will give good reproduction of photographs and the printing process is fairly quick. As with offset, any number of papers and inks can be used.

An Extension employee and adult educator using newsletters as a

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[12] Ibid.

means of communicating with members of an audience and as a means of supplying them with information they can use, can under most circumstances, use the Federal Penalty Mailing Privilege. Regulations for the privilege are contained in the booklet "The Use of the Federal Penalty Mailing Privilege by Extension Employees." One of the basic things to know about the privilege is that it allows an Extension worker to mail certain information to an audience without having to pay postage. Postage is paid by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

One of the federal regulations for using the privilege is that a mailing list must be "purged" once a year to confirm the names of those persons who wish to continue receiving information from an Extension employee. This regulation can be helpful to an adult educator because a "newsletter mailing list should contain names of people who want and need your information. You should be on the lookout for new names to add to the list. Be sure to ask them if they would like to receive your newsletter before sending it to them."[13]

Research on the effectiveness of newsletters has been conducted but is somewhat lacking in completeness. Direct mail, of which newsletters make up only a small part, repeatedly has proven itself to be an effective means of reaching people and communicating information to them. "Industry spends more than $2 billion a year (one out of every six advertising dollars) on direct mail advertising. The nation's fastest growing advertising medium, direct mail ranks second in volume only to newspapers among major media. Industry invests more money each

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[13] Johnson, p. 77.

year in direct mail than in radio, television or magazine advertising."[14]

The impressive amount of money industry spends yearly on direct mail advertising indicates the medium is effective, but is the statement "What is good for industry is good for the Extension Service" necessarily true? Surveys taken during the last decade by various state Cooperative Extension Services indicate it may be. Dr. Howard Dail, Extension communications specialist at the University of California at Berkeley, has done quite a bit of research work in California to determine the effectiveness of newsletters in reaching an audience, but he wrote March 29, 1971, "Frankly, I wish there were more, and more intensive, studies of newsletters, but I am unaware of any in progress."[15]

In a survey conducted by farm advisors in California during 1961-62, newsletters were found to be a good source of information for 1,474 persons responding to the survey questionnaire. The California surveys also have indicated that newsletters are kept around the house after receipt; about one-fourth of the recipients file these. In one study, a majority of those reporting indicated they read all the items in the newsletters.[16]

In 1969, California was sending out 402 newsletters on the county level, 50 on the state level and eight area letters. In March 1970, Dr. Dail conducted a questionnaire study of the effectiveness of newsletters and other forms of media disseminated through the 11 county

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[14] communications handbook, p. 50.

[15] Personal correspondence with M. W. Sampson, hereafter as Dail.

[16] Howard Dail, "County Newsletters Inform Your People," (University of California, 1966), pp. 1,9.

Extension offices in California that were selected for the survey area. He found that: "Those who indicated they received information from Agricultural Extension through other means than publications stated that 'directly from advisors' was their first means, with newspapers, newsletters, radio, exhibits, and television following in that order."[17]

Dr. Dail also said a survey of a newsletter, "Community Resource Development," issued by West Virginia University and going to a selected list of 2,800 persons judged to be "leaders" in eight counties in that state was completed in April 1970 by Leighton G. Watson at WVU.

The last newsletter was distributed in October 1968, but the interview survey of 139 persons selected did not begin until six months later. "Eighty-two per cent (95 persons) remembered receiving copies of the newsletter, and 65 per cent of those individuals remembered the general content of the letter. Of those remembering, 84 per cent considered the newsletter a good source of information. Sixty per cent of those interviewed had discussed the content of the newsletter with friends and neighbors and recently had been asked to express opinions about public affairs."[18]

Other surveys too have found direct mail to be effective in providing educational information. In 1964, the Washington State University Cooperative Extension Service conducted a farm and home accident survey in Whitman and Yakima counties. Basically, the survey showed that "one piece of direct mail can create about the same amount of interest as a

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[17] Dail.

[18] "datelines from the Information Staff," (University of California--Agricultural Extension Service, July 1970).

two or three week campaign in mass media, and is a surer way of reaching a specific audience."[19]

Ten surveys conducted by the Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension Service found that both men and women in various counties in the state preferred getting information through newsletters. Emory J. Brown, in charge of Extension studies at Penn State, headed up the survey. In the survey, methods by which people in the area could obtain information "were limited to those over which a county staff would have some degree of control. For this reason, magazines were not included."[20]

Brown's study showed newsletters were not only the favored method of getting information, but the newsletter also was effective as far as members of a newsletter's audience following some of the practices recommended.

> In all studies, the newsletter was the preferred method of receiving information for home economics topics. The evidence obtained from the men in some of these surveys was quite similar in that the newsletter was always given first preference with personal visit second.
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> In a survey of four marketing letters distributed by the marketing Extension specialists at Penn State, 5,600 readers and 55 agricultural agents were asked the extent to which they

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[19] Miss Sherry Carlson, Washington State University Extension publications editor, interview with M. W. Sampson, (March 30, 1971).

[20] "the Evaluator," (Pennsylvania State University, January 1968).

> made use of the letters. Letters were usually always read and the information was seen as being useful to all but a small fraction of the readership. In another study conducted in McKean County to evaluate the effectiveness of a program to decrease mastitis, a major finding was: "Of the mass media teaching techniques, the newsletter was the most effective in reaching the dairymen, whereas news articles and radio programs were least effective.[21]

Research has shown the effectiveness of the newsletter as an educational tool, especially in certain cases, but as with any tool used by an adult educator to teach and reach adults, the newsletter has both advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps one of the greatest advantages is that an educator can single out his audience and send it the message he wants, in the form he chooses, when he wants.[22]

The audience is controlled by the mailing list. In other words, rather than sending a newsletter about marketing of dairy products to all the residents in an area, as is done with bulk mailing, an adult educator can select the dairy farmers in the area and send the marketing information directly to them and only them.

Newsletters also are advantageous when dealing with an area where it would be difficult to reach people with specific information to meet their needs. In commenting on California's success with newsletters, Dr. Dail notes that:

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[21] Ibid.

[22] communications handbook, p. 51.

> One of the chief reasons the newsletters have gone well in this state is that we have so many specialized farmers producing some 200 commercial crops. Also, our agriculture varies so much with different areas. One news story or one radio broadcast expected to reach all the counties would be a ridiculous hope. One part of the state may be clearing snow from its roads, while another has a full fledged growing season well under way with temperatures in the 80's and 90's. Within a county there may be 50 dairy farmers who do only dairying. They couldn't care less about an article dealing with cotton production in that county. We believe that newsletters and such publications as circulars and leaflets complement each other. No state can keep revising its publications every few months, but with newsletters, changes in information or recommendations can be passed along quickly and to the group where such information is needed.[23]

Citing Hadley Read in The Cooperative Extension Service, Emory Brown lists some of the major advantages of newsletters as being the fact they allow the audience to use the newsletters for future reference, and the audience members can read the newsletter when convenient and at their own pace.[24]

The main disadvantages of the newsletter, as listed by Brown, include the fact the adult educator "must build and maintain mailing lists; the message must compete in the mailbox; you need certain minimum

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[23] Dail.

[24] Brown.

physical facilities; and newsletters may be relatively expensive compared with newspaper, radio and television."[25]

The disadvantages surrounding the use of the newsletter certainly could have a detrimental effect on its usefulness in reaching and teaching an adult audience. Competing with other mail in the mailbox can create problems, especially with the public attitude toward "junk mail" nowadays. Although no adult educator would be proud to hear his carefully prepared newsletter called "junk mail," he should be aware of the fact this could happen. For this very reason, a great deal of attention to details will assure an educator that his newsletter is worthwhile, is attractive and does contain information an audience will want to read.

Any discussion of the usefulness of the newsletter in adult education would be somewhat redundant of the discussion of the advantages surrounding the newsletter. The newsletter does allow the adult educator to use a rifle approach rather than a shotgun approach in reaching his audience. In effect, the newsletter is an extension of the adult educator, and to make his educational program effective, an educator needs to speak to those he has picked as an audience, and not preach to the masses.

In its usefulness as a tool for educating adults, the newsletter has four broad functions: Informing, promoting, guiding and coordinating.[26] These four functions should be in the mind of the newsletter editor when

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Virginia M. Burke, Newsletter Writing and Publishing, (Columbia University, New York, 1958), p. 6.

he is composing his ideas. And it is more than possible all, or several, of these functions could be contained in one newsletter.

The newsletter, as a communications tool, is but one facet of an educational program an adult educator has at his disposal. The newsletter should be regarded as a means to augument other forms of communication, since "direct mail can't do the communications job alone."[27] The newsletter, for example, was shown in the Pennsylvania State survey to be helpful in reinforcing a farm visit,[28] which in turn reinforces the educational process.

Another aspect of the newsletter as a useful tool for the adult educator is that a newsletter, because of its individualized mailing, can reach a number of persons with specific information, information that perhaps could be conveyed to a geographically diverse audience in no other way. In addition, an adult educator can use a newsletter to relay urgent information to his audience, information that perhaps would be old by the time a meeting could be called and held, or a news article written for weekly newspapers and distributed to them. Radio broadcasts would be quick, but here the target would be the mass, not the specific audience. Also, with a newsletter, there is no editor on the receiving end to "cut" the story, as can happen with newspapers and radio.

Newsletter, because they are an extension of an educator's personal visit, are useful in that a newsletter "requires a relatively small amount of the agent's time in relation to the size of the potential audience," and "...a well prepared newsletter may influence

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[27] communications handbook, p. 51.

[28] Brown.

changes of practices at a relatively low cost."[29]

Because a newsletter is a compact source of information, members of an audience can file copies of the newsletter for future reference if they wish, and in doing so, a textbook of specific information can be built. And because a good newsletter is arranged so each information piece relates to preceding pieces,[30] the textbook the audience is building can be updated, while increasing the knowledge of the audience one step at a time. If a member of an educator's audience cannot find the answer he needs from a back newsletter, he may be familiar enough with the educator, after a series of newsletters and seeing the educator's name on each one, to direct specific questions to the educator. And the educator is, in effect, a resource person.

Along these lines, a newsletter can develop a "personality" of its own through the educator's style, language and creativeness. And on top of being informative, newsletters can provide an element of entertainment for the audience, which sometimes may be a desirable quality in holding attention and adding variety.

Perhaps one of the most useful qualities of the newsletter, as related to adult education, is the variety of material that can be presented to the audience. There is little limit to the quantity and complexity of subject matter that can be presented in a well done newsletter, although detailed material may require a certain time to develop. While the mass media are effective in creating awareness and interest

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[29] Hall, p. 6.

[30] Brown.

in various topics, the depth of the subject can be dealt with through the use of a more personal teaching method or tool, such as the newsletter.[31]

In general, the newsletter can be a useful and effective method of reaching adults for the adult educator. And above all, the newsletter is flexible, able to respond to specific needs of a specific audience.

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[31] Ibid.

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Some of the information dealing with the printing processes is from personal experience as Assistant Superintendent of the Berea College Press, Berea, Ky.

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on Adult Education